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War on terror brings a 'gold rush' for grants

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WASHINGTON -- The city of Bellevue has never been struck by a terrorist's bomb, and security experts agree the city doesn't rank in the top tier of likely targets.

But those realities haven't gotten in the way of the newest equipment in the Bellevue Police Department's inventory -- a state-of-the-art bomb truck and a robot to sniff out and deactivate bombs. Total cost: \$316,000.

The war on terror has made police departments and the public alike nervous, but as billions of federal dollars are flowing in the name of homeland security, it's also presented a unique opportunity for police and local governments to fulfill long-standing wish lists.

Across Washington, communities large and small have bought equipment with a portion of the \$8.3 billion in funding the federal government has provided since 2002.

Washington has collected more than \$70 million in homeland security grants over the past three years -- \$44 million for fiscal year 2004 -- but as in many states, how money has been distributed has raised questions.

Nationwide, 80 percent of the grant money remains unspent even though the deadline for spending it all is less than a year away. "Do I think everyone's happy? No," said Ed Crawford, police chief in Kent and chairman of the Emergency Management Advisory Committee, a group that helps the state's nine regions decide how the money gets spent. "Some people get funds; others don't."

Unlike most states, Washington has a system to assess the type of equipment that's needed and where it should go. The goal, said Neil Clement, Whatcom County's director of emergency management, is to set rules "so every birdie out there doesn't think they need a bomb robot."

"Not everyone has to have a command vehicle," agreed Arel Solie, homeland security program manager at the state's Emergency Management Division, an umbrella agency that manages the federal grants. "We're looking to get the biggest bang for our buck."

Among the winners is King County, where all police cars are now equipped with gas masks and decontamination kits. But even the winners had complaints. Until last year, grants could be used only for equipment and planning, leaving cities such as Kent holding the bill for training its officers on how to use new equipment. For many, that money was hard, if not impossible, to find.

There's "a lot of stuff you have to do yourself," Crawford said.

In Aberdeen, a city with a population of 16,000 and heavy connection to fishing and tourism, the Police Department has yet to receive any homeland security money.

And in Blaine, home to Washington's major border crossing between the United States and Canada, there is "no specific money set aside for the borders," Clement said.

"We don't get enough attention," he said. Yet, he remains optimistic that money eventually will reach Whatcom County. The county's top priority is state-of-the-art software for dispatching and coordinating law enforcement.

"This year we walk, next year we trot, and then we'll run," he said.

Experts who track the funding said cities and highly populated areas get the most money and often get it first.

In Seattle, the city's first responders -- fire, police and emergency medical personnel -- received hazardous-material suits that shield them from chemical and biological dangers.

Elsewhere, one-quarter of Washington's hospitals are outfitted with decontamination stations as part of a four-year plan to get the hospitals equipped with necessary bioterrorism equipment.

Despite the seemingly haphazard approach in Washington state, analysts say the state has one of the more refined efforts when it comes to allocating homeland security dollars. Adjutant General Tim Lowenberg, the state's ranking military leader, has put a system in place to improve the odds that homeland security money is spent wisely.

Washington, Clement says, "doesn't want to blow this one."

But, he also admits it's overwhelming, with miles of red tape and occasionally conflict directives from the state and Washington, D.C.

Federal officials worry about the "gold rush," and the federal Department of Homeland Security is requiring each state to file a strategic plan for how it plans to spend the money. Washington's is due May 28.

The plans are viewed as a firewall against wasteful spending in large part because federal law requires that 80 percent of all homeland security money goes to local governments.

Solie stressed that the state makes sure "no county goes without, because everyone can make improvements."

Some of the grants are based on population, so "where there are people, there is a need," Solie said. "It just means certain places aren't going to get as much, but they're not forgotten."

Supporters of the process say the system is working reasonably well. Washington state is unique, they say, because it created a Committee on Terrorism in 2000.

Most states "brought people together in the aura of money," said Glen Woodbury, the director of the state's Emergency Management Division. In Washington state, collaboration before receiving the federal money was a key component to the state's success, he said.

Many states are experiencing a lot more difficulty distributing funds locally, while Washington's EMD designed nine specific regions to salt the money evenly and make sure each county assesses its specific needs based on threat.

When Congress began funding anti-terror efforts, the priority was to equip highly vulnerable targets such as New York and Washington, D.C. But lawmakers also knew that political reality required that money be available to even the smallest towns from Maine to Alaska.

Seattle and King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties will receive a bonus this year: \$750,000 for mass transit security efforts to aid the state's extensive ferry system, which carries 26 million passengers a year.

"We can't look at these funds as a one-time shot in the arm and we're vaccinated," Woodbury said. He said that just because the state got the money, it doesn't mean it is "immensely safer," and the plans need to be "sustainable over the years."

The way the state allocates the funding "is not something that is written in stone and shouldn't be," he said.

"The golden goose is going to start laying her eggs here in the end," said Eric Holdeman, director of emergency management for King County. "This money isn't a simple matter and we assumed the mantle of homeland security, so we can handle it."

Yet critics say Congress rushed to approve the state grant requirements, meaning that money will be poorly spent. Even local officials who support the program admit it can be daunting.

"The entire emergency management community feels like it's drinking from a fire hose," Clement said. "It's overwhelming."

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